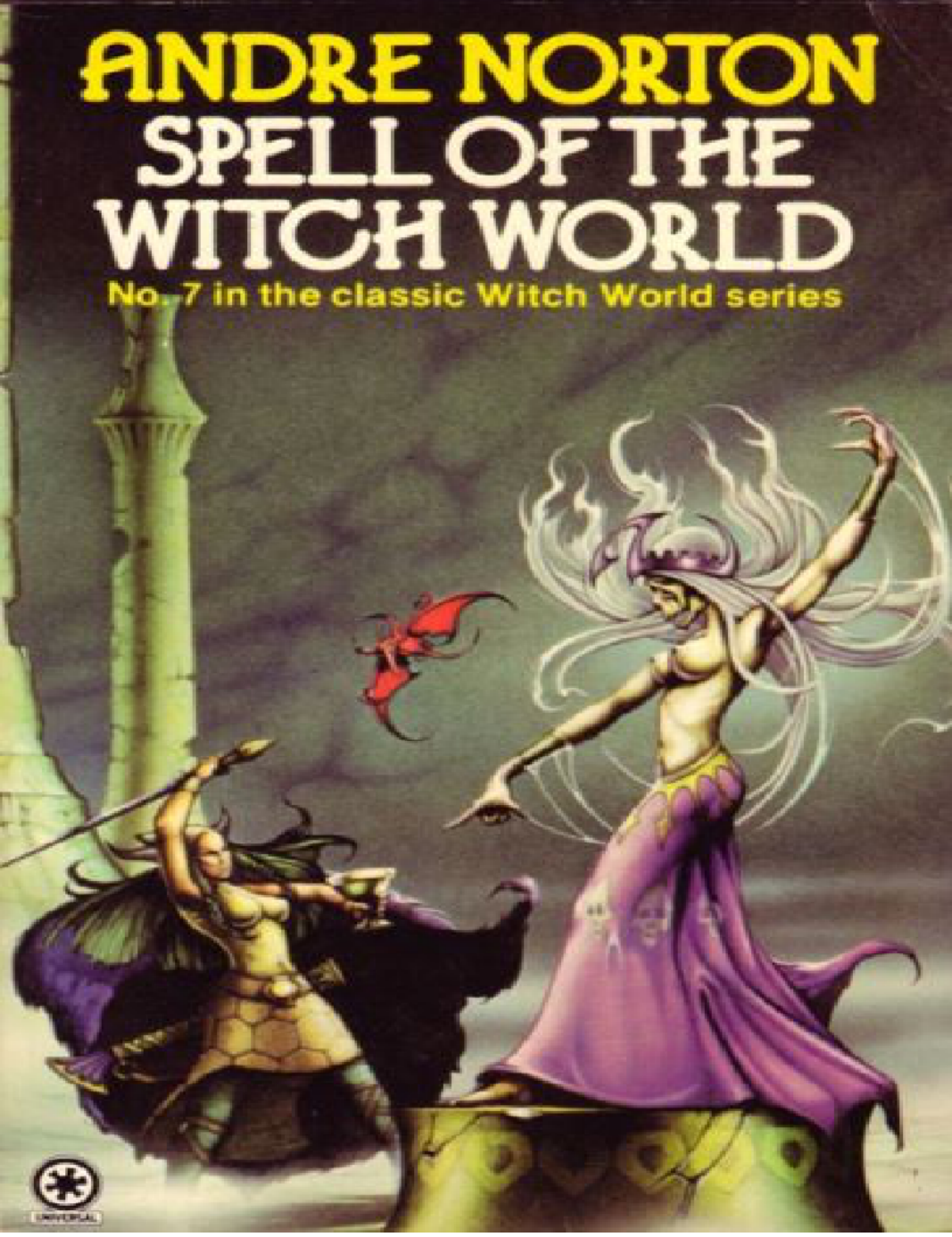
ANDRE NORTON

SPELL OF THE WITCH WORLD

No. 7 in the classic Witch World series



SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Amber out of Quayth
  - ◯ 1
  - ◯ 2
  - ◯ 3
  - ◯ 4
  - ◯ 5
  - ◯ 6

Amber out of Quayth
Andre Norton

1

Bees droned in the small walled garden, working to store their harvest before the coming of the Ice Dragon. Ysmay sat back on her heels, pushed a wandering tendril of hair from her eyes with an earth-streaked hand. Her own harvest lay spread behind her on a well-cured hide. Those herbs would be dried in the hut at the other end of the garden.

But when she stooped to cut and pull there was no answering clink from her girdle. She was not yet used to that loss. Sometimes she would find herself feeling for the keys she no longer wore, afraid (until she remembered) that she might have lost them during her digging and delving, pulling and cutting.

She had lost them indeed, those weighty responsibilities of the Uppsdale chatelaine, but not because they had left her belt by chance. No, they swung elsewhere now, Annet was lady in this hold. As if it were possible to forget that ever—though here in this one small place Ysmay could still claim sovereignty.

For five years, she had worn those keys. They had been at first frightening years, during which she had to learn much that was more demanding than the lore of herbs. Then the years had brought pride. She, a woman, so ordered life within the Dale that people lived with a measure of content, though the sharp edge of hunger's sword, the shadow of fear's mace, were ever over them.

In the end news came that the war in High Hallack was done, the invaders driven into the sea, or hunted like winter wolves to their snarling deaths. Men returned to their homes—some men. Among them not her father, nor her brother Ewald—they were long lost. But Gyrerd had ridden home with a ragged tail of the hold's menie. And with him Annet, who was daughter to Urian of Langsdale, now his bride and lady. Ysmay's tongue swept across her upper lip to taste the salt of her own sweat. But that was not as bitter as the salt of her life with Annet.

Now Ysmay truly lived under ill-faced stars. From ruler in the hold she had become a nithling, less than one of the kitchen wenches —for such had their duties, she none, save what lay within this garden —and that only because for Annet seedlings would not grow. Though Annet resented this with a bitterness she showed to Ysmay when she had opportunity, those with ills to be cured still came to their lord's sister, not to his lady wife. For Ysmay had the healing hands.

Healing hands, yet she could not heal the ache in her heart, her emptiness. Pride she still had, and that stubbornness which faced defeat shield up, sword ready. Bleak indeed might the future stretch

before her, but it would be a future of her own devising. At that thought a shadow smile curved her lips. Ha, Annet had thought to send her to the Ladies of the Shrine. But the Abbess Grathulda was a match for the Lady Annet. She knew well that Ysmay was not of the stuff of a Shrine Daughter. Passive she might school herself to be, but there was an inner fire in her which could not be quenched in prayers and ritual.

Sometimes that fire blazed high in her. But not even her own waiting wench knew the night hours when Ysmay paced her cramped chamber, thinking or trying to think of some way out of the trap.

Had these been normal times, had her father survived, she might have followed custom, gone to rule by marriage another hold. It could be that she would not even see her lord before their marriage day, but that was proper. As a wife she would have certain rights which none could gainsay her, those same rights which Annet held here.

But she had no father to arrange such a match. And, what was worse, no dowry to attract a suitor. War had cut too deeply the resources of the dale. Gyrerd, being what he was, would not lessen what he had left. His sister could go to the Ladies, or remain on grudging sufferance, which Annet could make as cold as winter.

The rebellion so hot in Ysmay was gaining strength. She willed it under her control, breathing deeply of the strongly scented air, making her mind consider what lay directly before her. She examined the plants she chose with deliberate care, when she wanted to tear and destroy in her frustration.

"Ysmay—sister!" Annet's sweetly reasonable voice was a lash across her shoulders.

"I am here," she answered tonelessly.

"News—most welcome news, sister!"

What, Ysmay wondered. She edged around, her dun-colored skirts kilted in a sprawl about long limbs which Annet's daintiness made seem so clumsy and out of proportion.

The Lady of Uppsdale stood just within the gate. Her skirts were the deep blue of the autumn sky. At her neck the silver beads winked in the light. Her hair, braided and looped high, was almost as silvery. In all she gave the impression of comeliness, if one did not note the thinness of those ever-smiling lips, or see that the smile was absent from her eyes.

"News?" Ysmay's voice was harsh in her own ears. It was ever so. She need only sense Annet near and she became what the other thought her—as if those thoughts produced some shape-changing magic—clumsy, loutish.

"Yes—a fair, sister! Such a fair as they had in the old days! A rider from Fyndale brings the news."

Ysmay caught some of Annet's enthusiasm. A fair!

Dimly she could remember the last fair in Fyndale. Through the mist of years, that memory had taken on a golden glory. Her reason told her that was not so, but her memory continued to trick her.

"A fair, and we shall go!" Annet made one of those pretty and appealing gestures which so enchanted any male in sight, clapping her hands together as might a little maid.

We? Did Annet mean Ysmay too? She doubted that. But the other was continuing.

"My lord says that it is safe now, that he need only leave a token force here. Ysmay—is this not fair fortune? Hasten, sister, you must come and look through the chests with me. Let us see what we can find that we shame not our lord."

I know what I can find in any chest of mine, Ysmay thought without pleasure. But it would seem that she was indeed to be included in their party. And she knew a swift rush of excitement which was akin to pleasure as she gathered up her morning's harvest.

Though she knew Annet was no friend to her, Ysmay could not fault her during the following days. Annet had a clever eye for dress and, from the few pieces of old finery of her own mother's time which Ysmay possessed, she pieced out two robes of more subtle cut than any Ysmay had ever owned. When she faced the burnished shield which served as her mirror, on the morning of their going, she thought she looked well indeed.

Never had Ysmay any pretense of the soft prettiness of Annet. Her face narrowed from cheekbones to a pointed chin, her mouth was far too large for her face. Her nose—there was no denying it was too high in the bridge. Her eyes were merely eyes, their color seemed to vary, being now green, again darkly brown. Her hair was thick enough, but it was not golden, nor richly black, just brown. Her skin, not properly pale, was also brown from her labors in the garden, the more so this season when she had been driven to spend more and more time there.

She was too tall for a woman, she had always known that. But in this robe—well, she looked more as a woman should look. It was made of an odd shade of tawny, just like—Ysmay turned to the small box which had been her mother's and took out a small amulet. Yes, it was the hue of this robe, was her amber talisman. The small piece she held was old and so worn she could barely distinguish the carving, but it was a warm, beautiful color. She found a cord to string it on and knotted it as a pendant.

For safekeeping she tucked it within the neck of the laced bodice. Her dress was made with divided skirt for riding, but to Ysmay it held all the enchantment of a court gown.

Though she was wary, she found little to worry her as she rode

with Annet. Gyrerd was ahead with his marshal, the body of the household straggling behind. Those who had mounts rode them at an ambling pace, others walked, for the promise of the fair gave good cheer above aching feet.

They left Uppsdale at dawn. At nooning they were at the south gate of the dale where they feasted on cold food. That night they reached the outer rim of Fyndale itself and camped in company with another party, the Lord of Marchpoint, his lady, daughter and their following. There was much coming and going with exchange of news and rumors.

Ysmay listened, but talked little. One thing she heard gave her a thought to dwell upon. The Lady Dairine, daughter of Marchpoint, coyly confessed her hopes to Ysmay. One of the great advantages which might be found at the fair was a future husband.

"My lady mother," Dairine offered as final evidence, "in the days before the war, of course, went to the fair at Ulmsport—which was a far greater gathering than this, sought by the highest of the Lords. It was there my father first saw her. And before he rode thence he had talk with her father. The matter was so settled that their betrothal was held at Midwinter Feast."

"I wish you the same luck," Ysmay answered, her thoughts busy. Was this why Annet and Gyrerd had brought her? But without a dowry what match could she attract?

A proper match? With half the lords and their heirs dead in the war, there could well be many maids never wifed. So—what then of those who had been shield-less men, newcomers without family names for kin blood? They had heard tales of masterless men who would now be master, men who had taken over abandoned holdings, calling themselves lord, with none to challenge them.

But such would be shrewd enough to drive hard bargains when it came to taking a wife. They might want kinship with old names, but they would also want a dowry. Would all do so? Ysmay felt a stir of a new excitement. What if—what if the most unexpected could happen?

She thought of Uppsdale which had been her world. It was not her world any longer, it was Annet's. She believed now and was sure this was true, that she could turn her back on Uppsdale if the future offered her a place of her own.

The fair was where it had been before, in the view of the gray stone pillar. The pillar remained from earlier days, when the men of High Hallack had not yet come to Fyndale. An older people had vanished before the coming of the Dalesmen.

Their traces held power of a sort—which troubled the Dalesmen. To pry too deeply might unleash that which could not easily be controlled. So there was awe and respect for old monuments. And at

Fyndale all who were the heads of households went directly to the pillar, laying their bared hands upon it and swearing peace, so that no feuds or old rivalries could disturb the fair.

Fronting the pillar the booths of the merchants were set up in a wide curve. At a little distance, on fields yellow with the stubble of cut grain, sprouted the tents and flimsy lean-tos of the visitors. There the party from Uppsdale rode to set up temporary lodging.

"Ten merchants' flags, sister." Annet, flushed of face, bright of eye, slapped her gloves into the palm of one hand. "Ten merchants of consequence, perhaps even some from Ulmsport! Think of it!"

It had indeed been a long time since merchants of such standing had come into the upper Dales. Ysmay was as eager as the rest to see what lay in those booths. Not that she had aught to spend. But even to look would be a feast for the eyes, something to remember during drab future days. They had hardly expected to find merchants of the flag class.

Annet, Ysmay, and the two ladies of Marchpoint went to explore the booths. What the traders had to offer might be poor after the long years of war and the failure of overseas trade, but it was still far more than they had.

The Lady of Marchpoint had a round of silver to lay out in the booth of woven stuffs. It was to be spent, Lady Dairine proudly told Ysmay in a whisper, for a length to make at least an over-tunic, to be kept for her wedding. And the spending of such a sum took caution and bargaining.

They studied several lengths of heavy silk. None was new, some even had small needle holes unpicked from earlier sewing. Loot, Ysmay suspected, perhaps found among the pickings when the invaders' camps were overrun. She loved the rich coloring, but thought she would not care to wear anything made of plunder. Thought of the previous owner would have troubled her.

There were laces too. They also had the appearance of former use. But the merchant had some bolts of less rich stuffs. These were well dyed (Ysmay was sure she recognized the colors from her own experiments) warm and excellently woven. Those she coveted more than the lengths the Lady of Marchpoint fussed over.

It was hot in the booth, even though the front was looped up. At last she moved to the opening, looking away from the temptation of those fabrics she could not buy.

So Ysmay witnessed the arrival of Hylle, an impressive sight, for he led in a train of men and pack-beasts to rival that of a Dale lord. He had no flag at the van to label him merchant, nor did he come close to the booths already set up, but rather waved his following to a site at one side, keeping aloof from the company of his kind.

His men were shorter than most Dalesmen and, in the unusual bulk of clothing they had upon them, looked squat, clumsy, though they worked with speed and assurance, setting up booth poles, unrolling walls and roof of hides to be stretched over the frame. In spite of the heat, the workers wore their head hoods pulled well down, so Ysmay could not see their faces, a fact which made her uneasy.

However the master was in full view. He had not dismounted and his mount was a good one, fully equal to any a Dale lord would be proud to bestride. He sat with one hand on his hip, the other playing with the reins, watching the efforts of his followers.

Even in the saddle he loomed tall, and looked more warrior than merchant—though in these days a man must be both if he would protect his goods. He wore no sword, but there was a long knife at his belt. Fastened to his saddle was a light battle mace.

Unlike his followers he had bared his head, his riding cap hanging from his saddle horn. His hair was very dark and his face curiously pale for a man out in all weathers on the roads. He was not handsome by Dale standards, yet once you had looked upon him, you could not easily turn your eyes away. Rather you found yourself scanning him intently as if you could so read what manner of man he was.

He had sharp features, a mouth set straight as if used little to expressing emotion, black brows across his nose to form a single bar. The color of his eyes Ysmay could not see, for his lids drooped as if he were sleepy. Yet she did not doubt that he saw all about him, and had thoughts concerning what he saw.

There was that which hinted that he wore an outer self which was not the same as his spirit. Ysmay decided her fancies must be more controlled—still the impression clung that here was a man few would ever know. She believed he would be worth knowing nonetheless. She felt heat rising in her cheeks, and inner disturbance she had not known before.

Ysmay turned sharply away, aware her stare had been too intent. She hurried back to the others and stood gazing at the length of rose silk the Lady of Marchpoint had chosen, not seeing a thread of it.

They did not visit Hylle's booth, since he had not opened for business. It was not until they ate their evening meal that Ysmay learned what wares he had brought to the fair and that his name was Hylle.

"From the north," Gyrerd said. "Amber—they say a real treasure in amber. But he has chosen ill. I do not believe there is enough coin here to buy more than two beads of it! His name is Hylle, but his men are a queer crew—keeping to themselves, not even sending for a jug of Mamer's autumn ale."

Amber! Ysmay's hand sought the amulet beneath her bodice. Yes, this merchant Hylle would find few here to buy such. But like enough he was on his way to Ulmsport and had only stopped along the road, hearing of the fair. Amber—she knew where her own piece had come from—the cleft of a hill-born stream. Once there had been more. Fifty years ago, amber had brought riches to Uppsdale. But that was before a fall of rock had sealed the source.

She smiled ruefully. Were that not so, why, she would be the one to wear not only amber, but gold. She would not have to haggle for a length of old, needle-pricked silk from some looter's spoil—but that barren hillside which now hid the amber for all time had been sealed even to Ysmay's mother. And on her mother's dying it had come to her. Nothing was there now but stone and a few stunted trees, and most had forgotten that a piece of ground, without price or use, was hers.

"Amber—" Annet repeated, her eyes shining as they had when she had earlier looked upon the silks. "My lord, amber is a powerful thing, it can cure. The Ladies of Grayford had a necklet of amber and those who were taken with evils in the throat wore it with a blessing so it wrought their cure. Yet it is beautiful also, like honey grown hard, so its sweetness abides. Let us go and look upon this Hylle's wares!"

Gyrerd laughed. "My dear lady, such sweetness is beyond the purse at my belt. I might well pledge the whole of Uppsdale and not raise enough to buy such a necklet as you spoke of."

Ysmay's hand tightened. For, while the amulet was hers, if Annet saw it, could Ysmay continue to keep it? Annet had taken all else, but this was not for her grasping hands.

"He will find few buyers here," Annet said thoughtfully. "But if he sets up a booth, he must show what he has. And maybe—with so few buyers—"

"You think he will ask less? Perhaps you are right, my lady. Only do not make big eyes and sigh, for there is no hope. Not because I would say you nay for a whim, but because I have no choice."

Though the dark of twilight was already here they went to where Hylle's booth was marked by blazing torches, tended by two of his men, still keeping their hoods, their faces shadowed.

As they passed one man, Ysmay tried to see him better, but could not distinguish his features. She felt only a shrinking as one might from something misshapen, not by the whim of nature, but because of inner blight. Again she chided herself for being fanciful and hurried after the others.

2

Rich color was here, not in draped lengths of material, but laid out on tables. Here was worked amber in such quantity as Ysmay would not have believed existed.

Nor was it all the honey amber. It ranged through subtle shades, each laid on a backing to enhance it—pale, near to white, bright yellow of butter, reddish, bluish, greenish. And it was wrought into necklaces, armlets, bow-guards, girdles, set into the hilts of swords and knives, in rings, in circlets for the head. There were larger pieces which were bowls or goblets, or small figures of gods and demons—Facing that display the party from Uppsdale came to a halt, staring as fieldworkers might do if suddenly transported to the feast hall of a lord.

"Welcome, Lord, Ladies." Hylle bowed, not in the obeisant greeting of a merchant, but as though he dealt equal to equal. He clapped his hands and two of his hooded men shambled out to put stools to the middle table. Another brought a tray of cups with a greeting drink.

Ysmay saw the uncertainty of her brother. He was jealous of his rank, claimed due reverence from a shield-less man. Still he accepted a cup, drank to Hylle, and the women did likewise.

The drink was spicy rather than sweet and Ysmay held it in her mouth, trying to guess the mixture of herbs in its making. But with all her learning she could not be sure. Still holding the cup she sat content to look about.

There must be more than a High Lord's hold ransom in value here and she wondered at the folly—or courage—of a man venturing overland with this in such unsettled times. Folly? She looked at Hylle. No folly in his face, only courage and something else, an assurance close to arrogance.

"Riches, Merchant." She had missed the first of Gyrerd's speech. "Too rich for us here. We have felt the hard hand of the invader too heavily to make good customers."

"War is harsh." Hylle's voice was low but deep. "It spares no man, even the victors. And in the time of war, trade is deeply wounded. It has been many years since Quayth's amber has been shown in any market place. So to water trade that it may sprout and grow, prices are lower—even for such as this—" He caught up a necklace of many pendants.

Ysmay heard a sigh from Annet. Her own hunger awoke also. Yet —there was something—She pressed her hand once again on Gunnora's charm and, as she did so, she felt sudden distaste for what

she saw, perhaps because there was so much of it. Heaped so together its beauty seemed belittled, diminished.

"Quayth?" Gyrerd made of that name a question.

"To the north, my lord. As you know amber is found on the shore of the sea in certain places, or along streams. The ignorant say it is the casting of dragons, but that is not so. Rather is it a hardened gum exuded from trees thousands of seasons dead. In Quayth there must once have been a mighty forest of such trees, for amber is easily found —easily I say in comparison to other places.

"Also you see here the fruit of many years of collection when because of the war it could not be offered generally for sale. So that this is more than would be in one place in the natural order of things."

He replaced the necklace and picked up a broad pendant wrought into a shape Ysmay could not clearly see.

"Now here you have a talisman of Thunder Shield, an older piece. See you the difference?" He held it closer to an armlet. "The older it is, the longer exposed to the air and handling, the more amber takes on a deeper and richer coloring."

He put back the armlet but continued to hold the pendant. There was a slight change in his expression. It seemed to Ysmay that he was looking with a searching intensity at Gyrerd, and then to Annet. Finally those dark eyes, whose color she could not name, were turned in her direction, as if to draw from her, even against her will an answer to some unknown question.

"Quayth seems to be well favored," Gyrerd said. "Better by far than Uppsdale in our grandfather's time."

Hylle's eyes swung from Ysmay. She had been uncomfortable, wondering what there was about her to catch and hold his attention.

"Uppsdale, my lord?" Hylle's tone invited an explanation.

"There was a rock cut which yielded some amber, enough to make life smoother," Gyrerd replied. "But later a fall of rock, such a slide as no man could dig through, sealed it. If any remains there it is useless as if it lay at the bottom of the sea."

"A sad loss, my lord," nodded Hylle.

Annet rose from her stool, wandered from table to table. Now and then she put forth a finger to touch a necklace, a skillfully wrought circlet of amber flowers and leaves for the hair. But Ysmay stayed where she was, watching Hylle from beneath lowered lids. She knew that he was as aware of her as she of him.

There was a heady excitement in this centering upon a man. Yet he was only a merchant.

At last they left and, when they were out of the booth, Ysmay drew a deep breath. One of the hooded servants was detaching a burned torch from its standard to replace it. His hands were covered

with gloves which was strange, for those were only worn by commoners in the coldest weather. But strangest of all was the fact that each finger and thumb tip was provided with a hooked claw extending for a noticeable distance, as if to resemble those of a beast of prey. Ysmay could not conceive of any reason to so embellish a hand covering. Dalesmen had many superstitions. Protective amulets were common, was there not one such about her neck? Suppose these strangers wore as protective magic the claws of some animal? With this answer her mind was more at ease.

But she could not forget how Hylle had stared at her. She discovered that her answering excitement lingered. So that she held his face in mind and tried also to picture the Quayth from which he had come and what his life must be there.

Vaguely she heard Annet prattle of the necklace. And then came a single sentence which awoke her abruptly from her dream.

"But my lord, remains there nothing then of the amber found at Uppsdale? Surely your grandfather did not barter it all!"

"It went during the lean years, sweetling. I remember that my mother had an amulet left once—"

Ysmay's hand was to her breast in protection. Annet had taken all else, and that she had had to yield. But Gunnora's charm was hers! And she would fight for it.

"But is it true that the place where it came from could not be reopened—" Annet persisted.

"Too true. My father, when it was sure war would come, needed treasure for weapons. He brought in a man used to the iron mines of the South Ridges, paying well for his opinion. But the fellow swore no skill could shift that rock fall."

Ysmay felt small relief. At least Annet did not ask more about remaining amber. She excused herself and went to her pallet.

But not to sleep easily. When she did it was with her hand closed protectively about Gunnora's amulet. She dreamed, but when she awoke she could not remember those dreams, though she carried into waking the feeling they had been important.

The Lady of Marchpoint and Dairine came in the morning, excited over Hylle's wares. Again they had hard money to lay out. And seeing Annet's mouth droop, Gyrerd hacked one of the silver rings from his sword belt.

"If he lays his prices low to gain a market," he said, "get you a fairing. More than this I cannot do."

Annet said her thanks quickly. Experience had taught her how far her demands might go.

So, somewhat against her will, Ysmay returned to Hylle's booth. This time his hooded servants were not visible. But within the door,

on a stool, squatted a woman of strange aspect.

She was thick of body, her round head seeming to rest directly on her shoulders, as if she possessed no neck. Like the hooded men, she was dressed in a robe of drab hue but hers was patterned over with symbols in thick black-and-white yarn.

Her girdle was of the same black and white mingled together. Now her fat hands rested on her knees, palms up as if she waited for alms, and she stared into them. She might have been holding a scroll from which she read.

Strings of coarse yellow hair hung from under a veil fastened with braiding. Her face was broad, with a straggling of hairs on the upper lip and along the paunchy jaw.

If she had been left as guardian of the booth, she was a poor one, for she did not look up as the ladies approached, but continued to stare absorbedly at her empty hands. Only when Ysmay passed her, did she raise her eyes.

"Fortunes, fair ladies." Her voice was in contrast to her lumpish, toadlike body, being soft and singsong.

"A reading of pins on the Stone of Esinore, or, if you fancy, the foretelling of what the Elder Gods have written on your hands."

Annet shook her head impatiently. At another time she might have been tempted. Now she had silver and a chance to spend it to the best of her bargaining powers. Nor was Ysmay ready to listen. That there were true seeresses, no one doubted. But she did not think this repulsive hag was one.

"Trust that which you wear, Lady—" For the first time the woman looked directly at her. The soft voice was very low, plainly meant for her alone.

And Ysmay found herself, against her will, listening.

Hylle came out of the shadows.

"Ninque seems to have a message for you, Lady. She is a true seeress, esteemed in Quayth."

This was not Quayth, Ysmay thought. Seeress or no, I do not want to listen to her. Yet she sat on the stool Hylle produced, to find herself eye to eye with the woman.

"Your hand upon mine, Lady, so that I may read what lies there."

Ysmay's hand half moved to obey. Then she jerked back, her disgust for the woman overriding whatever spell the other cast. The woman showed no emotion, only her eyes continued to hold Ysmay's.

"You have more than you believe, Lady. You are one for far faring and deeds beyond the women's bowers. You—no, I cannot read clearly. There is that under your touch now—bring it forth!"

Her soft, insinuating voice was a bark of order. Before she thought Ysmay pulled at the cord, drawing out Gunnora's amulet. And

behind her she heard a hiss of indrawn breath.

"Amber." Again the seeress' voice was singsong. "Amber in your hand always, Lady. It is your fate and your fortune. Follow where it leads and you shall have your heart's full desire."

Ysmay stood up. She jerked from her belt purse a single copper coin and dropped it into those hands, forcing herself to give the conventional thanks for foreseeing, though the words choked her.

"A good fortune, Lady," Hylle stepped between her and the woman. "That bit you wear—it is very old—"

She sensed he would like to examine it, but she had no intention of letting it out of her hands.

"It is Gunnora's talisman. I had it from my mother."

"A sign of power for any woman." He nodded. "Oddly enough I do not have its like here. But let me show you a thing which is very rare—" He put two fingers to her hanging sleeve. And it was as if the world suddenly narrowed to the two of them alone.

He picked up a box of fragrant pinsal wood, slid off its lid. Within was a cylinder of amber, a small pillar of golden light. Caught within it for the centuries was a winged creature of rainbow beauty.

Ysmay had seen in her own amulet small seeds, which was meet for a talisman of Gunnora's, the harvest goddess of fertile fields and fertile woman. But this piece was marked with no random pattern of seeds. It was as if the creature had been fixed by intelligent purpose.

So beautiful it was that she gasped. Hylle put it into the hands she had involuntarily stretched forth and she turned it around and around, studying it from all angles. Ysmay could not be sure whether the creature within was a small bird or a large insect, for it was new to her, perhaps something which had long gone from the living world.

"What is it?"

Hylle shook his head. "Who knows? Yet once it lived. One finds such in amber from time to time. Still this is unusual."

"Sister—what have you?" Annet crowded in. "Ah, that is indeed a thing to look upon! Yet—one cannot wear it—"

Hylle smiled. "Just so. It is a wall ornament only."

"Take it," Ysmay held it out. "It is too precious to finger lightly." At that moment she coveted the flying thing greatly.

"Precious, yes. But there are other things. Lady, Would you trade your amulet for this?"

He had stood the cylinder on the flattened palm of his hand, balanced it before her eyes to tempt her. But the moment of weakness was gone.

"No," she replied evenly.

Hylle nodded. "And you are very right, Lady. There is a virtue in such amulets as yours."

“What amulet, sister?” Annet crowded closer. “Where got you any amulet of price?”

“Gunnora’s charm which was my mother’s.” Reluctantly Ysmay opened her hand to show it.

“Amber! And Gunnora’s! But you are no wedded wife with a right to Gunnora’s protection!” Annet’s pretty face showed for an instant what really lay behind it. She was no whole friend, nor half friend, but really revealed herself as—unfriend.

“It was my mother’s and is mine.” Ysmay pushed the charm back under the edge of her bodice. Then she spoke to Hylle.

“For your courtesy in showing me this treasure, Master Trader, I give thanks.”

He bowed as if she were the favorite daughter of a High Lord. But she was already turning out of the booth, uncertain of where to go or what to do. She was sure that Annet would now work upon Gyrerd to take her only treasure from her.

Yet Annet, upon her return to their tent, said nothing of the amulet. Rather she was displaying with open joy a bracelet of butter amber, its bright yellow contrasting with clasp and hinge of bronze. That she had purchased it with her single piece of silver she took as a tribute to her bargaining skill. And Ysmay hoped she was now fully satisfied.

However, she steeled herself to be on guard when they met for their evening meal. Gyrerd admired the bracelet and Ysmay waited tensely for Annet to introduce the subject of the amulet. Instead it was her brother who at last brushed aside the continued exclamations of his wife and turned to Ysmay, eyeing her as if moved by curiosity.

“We may have had more than one stroke of luck from Hylle’s booth,” he began.

“The amber mine!” Annet broke in. “My dear lord, does he know of a way that it can be worked again?”

“He thinks so.”

“Ah, lucky, lucky day! Lucky chance that brought us to this fair!”

“Perhaps lucky, perhaps not so.” He kept a sober face. “The mine, if it still holds aught, is not sealed to the Hold.”

Annet’s face grew sharp. “How so?” she demanded.

“It was settled upon Ysmay for a marriage portion.”

“What fool—” Annet shrilled.

For the first tune Gyrerd turned a frowning face upon her. “It was sealed to my mother. There were still hopes then that it might be worked and my father wished her secure against want. The dowry she brought rebuilt the north tower for the protection of the Dale. When she died, it was sealed to Ysmay.”

“But the Dale is war-poor, it is now needed for the good of all!”

“True. But there is a way all may be satisfied. I have had talk with this Hylle. He is no common merchant, not only because of his wealth, but because he is lord in Quayth, of blood not unequal to our own. For some reason he has taken a fancy to Ysmay. If we betroth her to him, he will return half the amount of any amber he takes from the mine, using his own methods to open it again. See, girl?” He nodded to Ysmay. “You will get you a lord with greater riches than most hereabouts can claim, a hold where you carry the keys, and a full life for a woman. This is such a chance as you shall not find twice.”

She knew that was true. And yet—what did she know of Hylle, save that he held her thoughts as no other man had done? What did she know of his northern hold? Where would he lead if she gave her consent? On the other side of the shield was the knowledge that, if she refused, Annet would surely make life a torment, nor would Gyrerd be pleased with her.

Looking from right to left, then right again, she thought she had little choice.

Quayth could not offer her worse than Uppsdale, were she to say yes. And there was hope it would offer better. After all, most marriages in the Dales were made so, between strangers. Few girls knew the men they went to bed with on their marriage night.

“I shall agree, if matters are as he has told you,” she said slowly.

“Dear sister.” Annet beamed on her. “What joy! You shall have better faring than this dame of Marchpoint buys to dress her cow-faced daughter! And such a wedding feast as all the Dales shall remember! My lord,” she said to Gyrerd, “give you free-handed that your sister may go to her bridal as becomes one of high name.”

“First we shall have the betrothal,” he said, but in his voice also was an eager note. “Ah, sister, perhaps you have brought the best of fortune to Uppsdale!”

But Ysmay wondered. Perhaps she had been too quick to give her word. And now there was no drawing back.

3

All the lamps in the great hall were alight, for it was close to winter and shadows were thick. But Gyrerd did not scant on his sister's wedding feast, as not only the lamps but the food on the table testified.

Ysmay was glad that custom decreed the bride keep her eyes on the plate she shared with the groom. He was courteous in asking her taste in dishes, waiting for her first choice, but she ate only a token bite or two.

She had assented to betrothal; today she gave her word in marriage. Now she wanted only escape, from the hall, from this man. What folly was hers? Was she so mean-spirited that she must give all she had for freedom from Annet's petty spite? As for Gyrerd, he was so intent upon opening the old mine that his reaction to a refusal would not have been petty.

This was the natural way of life. A woman married to benefit her House, her kin. If happiness followed, then she was blessed indeed. Ysmay could hope for that, but not expect it in the natural order of things. And certainly he whom she had wedded would give her rule over hearth and hold.

Hylle had ridden in for the wedding with but a small train of followers and men-at-arms, but not the hooded laborers. They were newly hired for protection he said, since his own people were not weapon-trained. On the morrow, before the breath of the Ice Dragon frosted the ground into iron, his workers would try to reopen what rocks had closed.

Though Hylle had more than picks and spades. At Gyrerd's persistent questioning, he had admitted to a discovery of his own, a secret which he would not explain, but which he believed would serve.

Ysmay had not looked straightly at him since their hands had been joined before the niche of the house spirit. He made a brave showing, she knew, his tunic of a shade close to golden amber, with wrist bands, collar and belt of that gem. His bride gifts rested heavily on her—girdle, necklace, a circlet on her unbound hair—all of various shades of amber set together to simulate flowers and leaves.

The feast had been long, but they were close to the end. And if she had her will she would turn back time to live these past hours over—so the moment would not come when he would rise and take her hand while those in the hall drank good fortune, and those at the high table took up lamps to escort them to the guest chamber.

Her heart beat in pounding leaps, her mouth was dry, yet the

palms of her hands were wet until she longed to wipe them upon her skirt. Pride kept her from that betraying gesture. Pride must be her support now, and she held to it.

The signal was given, the company arose. For a second of panic Ysmay thought her trembling legs would not support her, that she would not have strength to walk the hall, climb the stairs. But somehow she did it. And she did not lean upon his arm. He must not guess, no one must guess her fear!

She clung to that as they stood at the foot of the great curtained bed. The scent of sweet herbs, crushed underfoot in a fresh laid carpet, fought with the smell of lamp oil, the odor of wine and of heated bodies, making her faintly ill. She was so intent upon holding to her mask of composure that she did not hear the bawdy jests of the company.

Had Hylle been one of their own they might have lingered. But there was that about him which fostered awe. So they tried none of the tricks common at such times. When they were gone, leaving but two great candles, one on either side of the chest at the foot of the bed, he crossed the room and set the lock-bar at the door.

"My lady." He returned to the chest whereon was a pitcher of wine, a platter of honey cakes. "I must share with you a secret of import."

Ysmay blinked. He was not the eager bridegroom, but rather spoke with the same tone as when he talked with Gyrerd about the mine. His attitude steadied her.

"I have spoken of my secret to open the mine. But I did not say how I came by it. I am a merchant, yes, and I hold the lordship of Quayth, make no mistake in that!" For a moment it was as if he faced a challenge. "But I have other interests. I am an astrologer and an alchemist, a seeker of knowledge along strange paths. I read the star messages as well as those of the earth.

"Because I do this I must sacrifice certain ways of mankind for a space. If I would succeed in what I do here, I cannot play husband to any woman. For all my strength is needed elsewhere. Do you understand?"

Ysmay nodded. But a new fear stirred. She had heard of the disciplines of the magics.

"Well enough." He was brisk now. "I had thought you were one of sensible mind, able to accept matters as they are. We shall, I am certain, deal well together. Let only this be understood between us from this hour forward. There are things in my life which are mine alone, not to be watched or questioned. I shall have a part of Quayth into which you venture not. I shall go on journeys of which you shall ask nothing, before or after.

“In return you shall have rulership of my household. I think you will find this to your liking. As for now, get you to bed. This night I must study the stars that I find the rightful time to turn my power against the stubborn rocks guarding your dowry.”

Ysmay lay back on the pillows of the bed, around which Hylle himself had pulled the curtains, cutting off her sight of him. She could hear him move about the chamber, with now and then the clink of metal against metal, or against stone. For now she felt only relief, not curiosity.

She thought she could accept the life he outlined with a right good will. Let him have his secrets, and she her household. She thought of her chest of herb seeds and roots, ready corded to take to Quayth. Alchemist he had said—well, she, too, had her knowledge of distilling and brewing. If Quayth had not such a garden as she had tended here, it would gain one. Fitting one plan to another, she fell asleep, unmindful of what went on beyond the closed curtain.

It was noon the next day when Hylle’s men brought in a wagon. They did not stay at the hall but moved on to that upper part of the Dale, to camp at the rock slide. Hylle suggested that the Dalesfolk keep away from the site since the power he would unleash might spring beyond his control.

He allowed Gyrerd, Annet and Ysmay to come nearer than the others. Still they must stand at a distance, watching the hooded men at work among the tumbled rocks. Then, when the leader whistled, all scattered. Hylle, carrying a torch in his hand, touched it to the ground. Having done so, he also ran with great loping strides.

There was a long moment of silence broken only by Hylle’s harsh breathing. Then—a roar—a shock—rocks rose in the air, the earth trembled and shook. Stones, split and riven by the thunder, rained down where the men had been a few moments before. Annet held her hands over her ears and screamed. Ysmay stared at the chaos the blast had left. The solid dam of rock was broken, pounded into loose rubble, and already the hooded men were upon it with pick and shovel. Gyrerd spoke to Hylle.

“What demon’s work is this, brother?”

Hylle laughed. “No demon obeys me. This is knowledge I have gained through long study. But the secret is mine—and will turn on him who tries it if I am not by.”

Gyrerd shook his head. “No man would want to use that. You say it is not demon raised, yet to me it seems so. To each his own secrets.”

“Fair enough. And this one will work for us. Could any hand labor so clear our path?”

Twice Hylle used his secret. After the debris of the second blast

was cleared, they fronted a cleft which might once have held a stream. Here the hooded men shoveled loose the remaining rocks of the slide.

Hylle went to the fore of that company, coming back with a handful of blue clay. He waved it before them triumphantly.

"This is the resting place of amber. Soon we shall have reward for our labors."

The hooded men continued to dig. Hylle stayed at their camp, not returning to the Hold. So Ysmay alone made the rest of her preparations for the journey north. Hylle had already warned that he must give no more than ten days to the present searching, since they would pass through rough country and winter was coming.

But the yield through the days and nights of labor (for the crew worked by torchlight and seemed not to sleep) was small. If Gyrerd and the others were disappointed, Hylle seemed not. He shrugged and said it was a matter of luck, and of the stars' guidance.

In the end he made a bargain with Gyrerd, which to Ysmay's hidden surprise, seemed overly generous.

For the few lumps taken out of the cutting, he offered in exchange some of his own wares, far to the advantage of the Dalesmen. Gyrerd made only token protest, accepting the trade avidly. Thus, when Hylle's party rode out of Uppsdale, all which had been found was stowed in the saddlebags of Hylle's own mount.

With a promise of return at the first loosing of spring, the party from Quayth turned to the wilderness in the north. This was indeed unknown country. When the Dalesmen had first come to High Hallack, they had clung to the shores, awed and fearful of the back country. Through generations they had spread inward, venturing west and south, but seldom north.

Rumors spoke of strange lands where those who had held this land earlier still lurked—always to the north and west. During the war the High Lords had sought any allies they could raise, and so had treated with the Were-Riders from one of those unknown sections. In the end the Were-Riders had retired again in that direction. Who knew then what lay beyond the next ridge?

Yet Ysmay was less wary than she might have been. Bred in her was a longing for what lay beyond her door, and she looked about her with interest.

For the space of two days they were in tilled land, spending the first night at Moycroft, now a ruin, abandoned during the war for lack of manpower. But by the third day they were well into the unknown—at least unknown to Ysmay's people, though Hylle seemed to have knowledge of it. Ysmay could see no trail markings, save here and there ruts of wagon wheels, made by Hylle's men.

This was a drear land where a bitter wind blew and one wrapped

one's cloak tighter and searched in vain for anything to break the awesome emptiness. To Ysmay's reckoning they were going more north than west, angling back toward the sea. She wanted to ask about Quayth, and the land about it, whether they might have neighbors. But Hylle was seldom with her. And when they were in camp he brought out a reading scroll, sometimes running his finger along crabbed lines, shaping words with his lips, but never speaking them aloud. There was a wall about him she could not breach.

She wondered more and more what it would be like to share a hold with a man who did not even talk to her. That warning he had given on their wedding night, and which she had accepted with relief, now appeared to have another aspect. She did not even have a maid-servant, for Hylle had refused to take any woman of the Dales, saying she would be well served and a maid away from her own land would be ever pining for home.

Thus turned upon her own resources, Ysmay spent much time thinking. Why had Hylle married her? Surely not just for a few lumps of unworked amber! With all that wealth of his own, he had no need for such a pitiful supply. And because the question was one to which she had no answer, she found it disturbing. The unknown provides rich soil for growing fear.

Hylle was not one of the shieldless men who wished to unite with an old family. And what had she to offer him? He had already made it plain that it was not for her body he had taken her.

Now they threaded through woods. Though the bitter wind no longer lashed, there was nothing reassuring about this forest. Their trail, which had to accommodate the wagon, twisted and turned among trees which were tall and old, whose trunks wore feathery lichens in green, rust, white or even blood red. Ysmay disliked the lichen. Underfoot, centuries of leaves had turned to dark muck and gave forth an unpleasant scent when stirred by the hooves of their mounts.

For a day they traveled so, pausing to eat of their provisions, to breathe the horses and rest. Hylle did not set a fast pace, but he kept a steady one. The silence of the forest acted upon them. There was little speech, and when a man voiced words, he sometimes glanced over his shoulder, as if he feared he had been overheard by one not of their party.

The trees thinned, their way sloped up. They camped that night in hills. There followed days which had so much of a sameness that Ysmay lost track of time.

This was no easy passage in the hills. Hylle took time nevertheless to go out each night with a rod of metal which he held to one eye to look upon the stars. He warned them they must make haste for storms

were not too far away.

He was right. The first flakes of snow began before dawn. All were roused out in the dark to ride. Now the slope was down again and in that Hylle appeared to take comfort, though he continued to urge them.

Ysmay had lost her sense of direction, for they had turned this way and that. However, by midmorn, there came a wind which carried a new scent. A man-at-arms had been detailed to ride with her (for Hylle accompanied the wagon). She heard him say, “That is a sea wind!”

They came down into a cut between ridges which ran as straight as if it marked an old road. The ridges banked away the wind, though here the snow piled deeper.

Suddenly the path curved and the right-hand ridge fell away, placing the travelers on a ledge. Cliffs glittered with the accumulation of salt crystals. The sea pounded below. Strangest sight of all was a wider section of ledge where the wind had scoured away the snow to clear three great stone chairs, carved from rock certainly not by nature but by intention. Each bore upon its seat a pillow of snow, softening its harsh austerity.

Ysmay recognized another ancient work of the Old Ones. Now she was sure that they were following a road.

Once more the way turned, this time inland. They saw ahead among the rocky cliffs a structure which seemed a part of its stony setting. It arose by wall and tower to dwarf any Dale-hold.

Hylle loomed out of the fine shifting of snow. With the stock of his whip he pointed to the vast pile.

“Quayth, my lady.”

She realized with a chill that her new home was one of the ancient remains. And, contrary to all the precautions and beliefs of her own people, she must dwell in a shell alien to her kind. But there was no turning back. She made an effort not to show her unease.

“It is very large, my lord.”

“In more ways than one, my lady.” His eyes held, searched her face as they had at the first meeting in the merchant’s booth—as if fiercely he willed her to reveal the fear which lay within her. But that she would not do. In a moment he spoke again.

“It is one of the ancient places, which the Old Ones had the building of. But time has been kinder to it than to most such. You will find it not lacking in comfort. Ha—let us home!”

Their weary mounts broke into a trot. Soon they passed the overhang of a great, darksome gate into a vast courtyard whose walls had towers set at four corners.

Two of those towers were round. That through which the gate

opened was square. The fourth displayed odd sharp angles, unlike any she had seen before.

Though there were faint gleams of light in some of the narrow windows, no one was here to bid them welcome. Troubled, she came stiffly out of the saddle into Hylle's hold, and stumbled through beginning drifts of snow under his guidance to the door at the foot of the nearest round tower. The others scattered through the courtyard in different directions.

Here there was rest from the wind, the heartening blaze of a fire.

To Ysmay's surprise, instead of a thick matting of rushes and dried herbs on the floor, she saw a scattering of mats and rugs of fur stitched together in fanciful patterns, light matched to dark.

These formed roads and pathways across the stone, the main one leading to an island of warm cheer by the hearth. There stood two tall-backed chairs, cushioned with pads of colorful stuff, even having small canopies above to give the final measure of protection against wandering drafts. There was also a table with platters and flagons. Hylle brought Ysmay to the blaze where she loosed her cloak and held her hands thankfully toward the warmth.

A musical note startled her. She turned her head. He had tapped a bell that hung in a carved framework on the table. Soon a figure came down the winding stair which must serve as a spine for the tower.

Not until the newcomer reached the fire could Ysmay make out who it was. Then she caught her lip that she might not utter her instinctive protest.

For this creature, whose head was level with her own shoulder, was that Ninque who had told the gabbled fortune at the very beginning of this change in her Me. Only now the seeress did not wear her fancifully embroidered robe, but rather a furred and sleeveless jerkin over an undertunic and skirt of rusty brown. Her head was covered with a close-fitting cap which fastened with a buckle under her flabby chin. She looked even less likely as a bower woman than as a prophetess.

"Greetings, Lord—Lady." Once more that soft voice came as a shock from the obese body. "By good fortune you have outrun the first of the bad storms."

Hylle nodded. When he spoke it was to Ysmay.

"Ninque will serve you, Lady. She is very loyal to my interests." There was an odd emphasis in his words. Ysmay was intent only on the fact that he intended to leave her with this oddling.

She lost pride enough to start to lay her hand in appeal on his arm. But in time she bethought herself and did not complete the gesture. He was already at the outer door before she could summon voice.

“You do not rest—sup—here, my lord?”

There was a glitter in his eyes which warned her. “The master of Quayth has one lodging, and none troubles him in it. You will be safe and well cared for here, my lady.” And with that he was gone.

Ysmay watched the door swing shut behind him. Again the dark question filled her mind. Why had he brought her here? What did he need or want of her?

4

Ysmay stood at a narrow slit of window, looking down into the courtyard. The tracks below made widely separated patterns. In a pile constructed to house a host, there seemed to be a mere handful of indwellers. Yet this was the eve of Midwinter Day. In all the holds of the Dales there would be preparation for feasting. Why should men not rejoice at the shortest day of the frigid winter when tomorrow would mean the slow turn to spring?

However, in Quayth there were no visitors, no such preparations. Nor did Ninque and the two serving wenches (squat and alien as herself) appear to understand what Ysmay meant when she asked what they were to do. Of Hylle she had seen little. She learned that he dwelt in the tower of sharp angles and that not even his men-at-arms —who had their quarters in the gate tower—ventured there, though some of the hooded men came and went.

Now when she looked back at her hopes, to be ruler of the household here, she could have laughed, or rather wept (if stubborn pride would have allowed her) for the wide-eyed girl who hoped she rode to freedom when she left Uppsdale.

Freedom! She was close-pent as a prisoner. Ninque, as far as Ysmay could learn, was the true chatelaine of Quayth. At least Ysmay had had the wit and wariness to go very slow in trying to assume mistressship here. She had not had any humiliating refusal of the few orders she had given. She had been careful not to give many, and those for only the simplest matters concerning her own needs.

This was at least a roomy prison, no narrow dungeon cell. On the ground floor was the big room which had seemed a haven of warmth at her first entrance. Above that was this room in which she stood, covering the whole area of the tower, with a circling open stair leading both up and down. Above were two bare chambers, cold and drear, without furnishing or signs of recent usage.

Here in this second chamber there was a bed curtained with hangings on which the needle-worked pictures were so dim and faded by time that she could distinguish little of the patterns, save that here and there the face of a dimmed figure, by some trick of lamp or firelight, would flare into vivid life for an instant or two, startling her.

There was one which appeared to do this more often than the rest. Thinking of it, Ysmay turned from the window, went to that part of the hanging and spread it with one hand while she fingered the face. This time it was dim, features blurred. Yet only a short time ago she had looked up from the hearth and it had given her a start as if a person stood there watching her with brooding earnestness.

She could close her eyes and see it feature for feature—a human face, which was better than some of the others flickering into life there at night. Some had an alien cast as if their human aspect were but a mask, worn above a very different countenance. This one was human, and something about it haunted her. Perhaps her memory played tricks but she remembered a desperate need in its expression.

Which proved how narrow her present life was, that she must make up fancies about old needlecraft! Ysmay wondered whose needles had wrought this and when. She smoothed the length of cloth with her fingertips, feeling the small irregularities of the stitching.

Then her nails caught in something which was no soft embroidery, but a hard lump. She fingered it, unable to detect it by eye, only by touch. It seemed to be within the material. She went for a hand lamp, holding it as close as she dared.

Here was the figure which had intrigued her. It wore a necklace—and this lump was part of the necklace. Inspection showed it concealed within the threads.

With the point of her belt bodkin Ysmay picked delicately at the object. It had been so tightly covered by overstitching that the task was a long one. But at last Ysmay could pull out the ends of cut threads, squeeze what they held into her hand. It was smooth—She held it close to the lamp. Amber certainly! Wrought into a device so intricate that it took her some time to see it in detail.

A serpent crawled and turned, coiled and intercoiled. Its eyes were tiny flecks of butter amber set in the darker shade of its body. The almost invisible scaling on its sides was a masterwork of carving. In spite of inborn repugnance for scaled creatures, Ysmay did not find the stone unpleasant. In fact, the opposite was true.

Then—she gave a little cry and would have flung it from her but she could not.

Those coils were turning, writhing, coming to life!

She watched with horror as the serpent straightened from the involved knot in which she had found it, then coiled again in the hollow of her palm after the fashion of the living kind it resembled. Its head was upheld, with the yellow eyes turned to look at her, and there was a flickering at its tiny mouth as if of tongue play.

For a long moment they remained so, Ysmay and the thing she had freed. Then it slid across her hand while she still could not move to hurl it away. It was not cold as a serpent would have been, but warm. She was aware of light perfume. Certain rare ambers had that scent.

Down to her wrist, under the edge of her sleeve, the serpent went. She felt the warmth encircle her arm and snatched back her sleeve. The serpent was now a bracelet, one she could not rid herself of, no

matter how hard she tried. She must either cut it in twain or break it into bits.

Ysmay returned to a chair by the fire, holding her arm stiffly before her. What she had seen was not possible. True amber had once been a part of a living tree. The old idea that it was dragon spittle or dung was only a tale. Living things were found entrapped in it, such as small insects. She recalled the flying thing Hylle had shown her. But the stuff itself did not live!

It had certain odd properties to amuse the curious. Rub it well and it would draw to it, as a magnet attracts iron, small bits of chaff, hair and the like. It could be crushed and distilled into oil.

Distilled! Ysmay stood up, her hand still outstretched lest her wrist touch her body. She went to the chest which she had packed with such care at Uppsdale. She had to use both hands to lift the heavy lid. She searched among the packets.

At last she found what she sought, brought out the bag which could be the answer to any witchery. Back in her chair she worried open the fastening, using her one hand and her teeth.

She savored the good odor from within. Of all herbs grown this was the greatest defense against the powers of dark—angelica, herb of the sun in Leo, talisman against poison and evil magic. Ysmay stretched forth her wrist to expose the serpent. Taking a pinch of the precious herb she rubbed it along the brown-red thread of body.

But the circle remained solid, as it might have been if wrought in this form from the beginning. She rubbed it well and then drew out the amulet of Gunnora. For She who was the protector of life would stand against all things of the Shadow. And to the serpent she touched that talisman. Word by word she repeated the charm.

> Life is breath, life is blood.
> By the seed and by the leaf,
> By the springtime with its flood.
> May this power bring relief!

She might as well be dealing with any ordinary bracelet. Yet she had witnessed the transformation and knew differently.

Cut it, break it! Even as Ysmay looked about for the means of doing either she saw the fire. Fire! Amber would melt at the touch of fire. She felt now she could endure burns on her flesh rather than carry this band.

But she found she could not reach for a brand. Instead she huddled in the chair, staring at the serpent. Its yellow eyes turned upon her. Larger those eyes grew until at last they merged into one circle of light, and it was as if she looked through a window.

Among shadows and pools of light, she caught glimpses of tables piled with strange bottles, loops of metal, bowls—the sullen glare of a furnace was in evidence. Then she was looking into another chamber cut by pillars.

The contents startled and frightened her. For even as the winged thing had been enclosed in Hylle's cylinder, here other shapes were enclosed, save these were much larger.

Some were so grotesque she gasped, but these were swiftly passed. Ysmay was drawn to the center of the chamber where stood two pillars apart from the others.

In one, the nearer, was a man. His face might be Hylle's save for a subtle difference, as if they were akin in blood but not in spirit. This was less the Hylle of Quayth than the Hylle she had seen at the fair. Looking upon him Ysmay felt again that strange excitement which had first moved her. Also it seemed that his staring eyes sought hers in turn.

But Ysmay no longer faced the man in amber. Now she was drawn to the other pillar and it held a woman.

Her dark hair was dressed high and held in a net of gold. The net was studded with flowers carved of butter amber. She also wore a circlet of dark amber in the form of a serpent. Her robe was silken and amber in color and about her throat was a necklace of nuts, each encased in clear amber. These glowed, seeming to blaze higher when Ysmay looked upon them.

The woman's eyes were open like the man's. While there was no sign of life about her features, those eyes reached Ysmay with appeal so strong it was as if she shouted aloud for aid.

Ysmay felt a whirling of the senses. Images formed in her head and were diffused before she could understand. Only that terrible need, that cry for help, remained. And in that moment she knew that she could not refuse to answer—though what the woman and man wanted from her she could not tell. A picture in her mind, imposed over the pillars as if a veil arose, was the courtyard of Quayth as she could see it from her tower. And what she faced now was the angled tower of Hylle's forbidden domain. She was certain that this chamber of the image lay within its walls.

Then that picture shriveled and was gone. The pillar chamber, too, disappeared. She was blinking at the fire on the hearth.

"Lady—" Ninque's soft voice broke the quiet.

Ysmay hurriedly dragged her sleeve over the serpent, hid Gunnora's amulet in a swiftly closed hand. But nothing could conceal the scent of the angelica.

"What is it, Ninque? I have thought to order my herbs and see if I have the making for a Midwinter Eve cup."

The woman's thick nostrils had widened, testing the air.

"Lord Hylle would speak with you, Lady."

"Then let him do so." As the woman turned her broad back, Ysmay slipped the cord of the amulet back over her head, hiding the talisman. Then she resealed the packet of angelica.

"My lord?" she looked up as Hylle came with his almost silent tread. Even if one could not hear his footfall on the fur mats of the room, one could sense his coming. He was like an invisible force disturbing the air. "It is Midwinter Eve, yet I have heard nothing of any feast." She must play the innocent wrapped in the customs of the life she had left behind.

But she found herself searching his features intently. How much was he like that other? If memory did not deceive her the subtle difference had deepened. Had Hylle of the fair worn a mask now laid aside in Quayth?

"Midwinter Eve," he repeated as if the words were in some foreign tongue. "Oh—a feast of your people. Yes, I am sorry, my lady, but you must keep it alone this year. An urgent message has come to have me ride out. Nor may I return before the morrow's morn." Then he was sniffing the air. "What have you here, my lady? The scent is new to me."

She gestured to the open chest. "Herbs. I have some small skill in their growing and usage, my lord. Now I check my store against the need for savor or scent. But—" she went to place the packet with the others—"since we shall have no feast, I need not concern myself with such."

"I am truly rebuked, my lady, that I have been so apart from you since our homecoming—and that I have not taken heed of the passing of time nor the fact that this feast was near. Forgive me this time and I shall not err again."

Instinct told her that these were merely words and that his feeling for her was such that he believed vague promises would always satisfy her as they might a child.

He went after several more meaningless words of courtesy and she watched from the window as he rode with his men-at-arms. Ninque came in shortly with a bronze bowl. In it was a necklace of many pendants. Their design alternated greenish and bluish amber. She guessed that the piece was a rarity, perhaps worth all the portable goods in the Uppsdale Hold.

Ysmay put the necklace on before a mirror. She simulated pleasure, calling Ninque and the two wenches who came with her supper to see how fine a gift her lord had sent her. She hoped her acting was good enough to deceive Ninque.

She had fastened her sleeve bands tightly at the wrist and there

was no chance of the woman spying what she wore there. When Ysmay sat down to eat she filled a horn cup and half raised it to her lips. Then she shook her head.

"I do not speak ill of your brewing," she said lightly. "But were mint added this would be a better drink. Have you ever drunk it so?"

"We know not much of southern herbs in these parts, lady. Our Quayth is in the path of too chill winds to let such grow. Mint I have heard of, but of its use so, that I have not."

"Then you shall taste and tell me whether or no you think I speak the truth. This is a feast eve among my people, Ninque. Since my lord cannot keep it with me, perhaps you will—"

For a moment the woman hesitated. Between her lips the tip of a pale tongue showed for an instant. Then her eyes, those ever-watchful eyes, went to the pitcher on the table.

"There is not enough for a second cup, my lady. You have ever refused more than one, so the wench did not bring it."

"Then have one of them fetch more, Ninque. Do not deny me even this poor revel on a feast eve."

Ninque turned to the stair reluctantly as one who had no excuse for doing otherwise, but would refuse if she could. Ysmay raised her horn again. She could detect in it only the odor of a good brew. But she was as sure as if someone stood at her shoulder speaking a warning, that there was something more in it. Poison? No, that she did not credit. But there were growing things which could be used in cunning ways, to bring deep sleep, to haze the wits so that memory would after play one false.

Why so sharp a suspicion came to her now, she was not to know. She knew only that she was warned. No sooner had Ninque gone than Ysmay was moved to action she did not understand. She unfastened her sleeve, held her bared wrist above the cup.

Instantly the serpent moved, but now its action made her more curious than afraid—even excited her as the prospect of battle might excite a fighting man.

The head of the serpent darted down to dip in the liquid, stirring it. Then it snapped up, once more catching the tip of its tail in its mouth, and hardening into a bracelet.

Ninque came up the stair with a tray on which sat a horn cup which she placed on the table. Ysmay went to her chest. Mint, yes, but she palmed another herb as well, with a skill at concealment she would not have believed herself capable of. While it was mint alone that she sprinkled in her own cup, the mint was mingled with another powder to flavor Ninque's. Then she took up a small spoon to stir each well.

"By rights, Ninque—" she smiled—"being both women, we should

have a sprig of ivy to dip in this for luck, then to fling into the fire to take all evil fortune with it. For my lord it would be holly—but ivy is for women. Since we have it not, I bid you good fortune."

"And so I do wish you, Lady," said Ninque.

Ysmay drank, though it was hard with that suspicion within her. How effective had the serpent been to counteract anything wrong—she did not know. But she was convinced that in its way the serpent was her protection, since Gunnora's charm had not repelled it.

"What think you of mint?" She had emptied her cup, set it aside.

Ninque put down her own.

"It has a fresh and pleasing taste, Lady. Your southern growths must be strong. Now—if you will excuse me—I must see to the wenches. You spoke of a feast and my lord was ashamed he had forgotten. But we shall do the best we can for the morrow."

"Which is right courteous. But true to the favor my lord has shown me. Yes, you may go, Ninque. I shall bed early, I think. For some reason I am sleepy."

Was she right in her guess—that the doctored drink was meant to drug her? She could read no change in Ninque's expression.

But after the woman had gone, Ysmay once more loosened her sleeve and held the serpent at eye level. This time it did not open any vision for her.

"I know not what is wanted of me," she addressed the carving in a whisper. "But there are many mysteries in Quayth, and perhaps danger of more than one kind. I cannot draw sword, but neither do I bend my neck to the yoke willingly. Whatever is to be laid upon me, let it begin here and now, for it is better to face danger squarely, than to wait for its coming while courage grows thin."

In the long moment of silence thereafter it came into her mind what must be done. She arose, put aside her outer garments, and donned her riding skirt which gave her greater freedom of movement. And she took her cloak of gray.

At the head of the stairs she listened and, when there was no sound below, she moved. She had learned that those sections of building uniting the towers were the quarters of the hooded people. With any luck Ninque and the wenches were safely back in their own.

Ysmay had to use both hands to draw open the outer door. The quickest way to the angled tower was straight across the courtyard. But she had no mind to reveal her going to any at some window.

Instead she slipped along the wall, her cloak and skirt dragging in the drifted snow until she reached the door to Hylle's stronghold. The hand she raised to its latch was the one above the serpent.

There was no lock. The door swung easily, perhaps too easily, to her pull.

5

A room of sharp angles was but dimly lighted.

Ysmay gasped, for facing her was a cloaked figure. Then she raised her serpent-girdled arm, and that other copied her gesture. She realized she fronted a mirror.

But for the mirror and two lamps high in wall niches, there was nothing—save smell. Her nose tingled at the war of strange odors here. Some might have been pleasing, but they were nigh overcome by acrid whiffs she could not identify.

She turned slowly, peering into those dusky angles. By her survey she discovered what could not be seen from the courtyard, that this tower had been erected in the form of a five-pointed star. She had a vague recollection of ancient lore concerning such a star.

However it was not this bare, shadowed room she sought. Seeing a stairway within one of the angles, she ascended. The steps were worn in depressions, as if from long use. In fact the whole interior of this tower carried the weight of years in its stones, as if a toll of centuries had settled upon it.

Thus Ysmay came into a chamber crowded with such a wealth of things as she could not sort into any understandable array. There were tables filled with curls of metal piping, with retorts, with bottles and flagons—some of which she recognized as akin to those used in herb distilling. And there were things she could not name at all.

She feared to touch anything. For that mingling of odors was very great, almost overpowering, bringing more than a hint of danger. Ysmay rubbed her fingers across the serpent.

For some reason it was lighter here, enough to show still another stair. Ysmay took care in crossing to it, threading a way by those littered tables, holding tight her cloak lest she brush something from one of them.

So she came up to the room of her vision. Here were the pillars forming first an outer star, and then an inner. Against the far wall were two tables. At the point of each star row were candlesticks as high as her own shoulder. In each burned a candle wrist thick. The flames were not honest red-gold, but bluish, making her own flesh look unhealthy and diseased.

Her hand went forth of its own accord. Someone might have held a chain fastened to her wrist, jerked it without warning, to draw her. She walked between two of the outer pillars, coming so to the center.

Before her was the woman of her vision, and the man who was Hylle, yet not Hylle. Imprisoned though they were, their eyes lived, fastened avidly on her as if they strove to cry aloud what must be

done. Yet if they had had the power to bring her here, that power was limited, for no message reached her.

But she could not doubt what they wanted—their freedom. Could people be so encased and yet live? This was magic such as she had met only in old legends.

"What must I do?" she begged them. She touched the surface of the pillar which encased the woman.

To her fingers it was solid. Broken? Cut? Amber was a soft material, easily worked. A knife might chip away its substance.

Ysmay drew her belt knife, used the point in a hacking blow, only to have good steel rebound as if she had struck at a stone. The force jarred her arm. Not even a scratch was left on the surface of the pillar.

That there was a way to free them she did not doubt, but it must lie in magic. She stepped away and turned slowly around, surveying the whole group of pillars set star within star. The blue light made even more fantastic the grotesque heads and bodies. But she forced herself to a full inspection.

Those of the outer star were not human, but a mixture of weird forms. The second star held more humanoid figures, half of them small, squat, wearing tunics like men.

Their bodies were thick, wide of shoulder, arms long, out of proportion. From their fingers and toes protruded long curved claws, closer to the talons of some bird or animal than to a human nail. Their faces—these surely had kinship with Ninque's people.

Nails, squat shapes—Ysmay fitted what she saw to make a thought which brought a shiver to her. The hooded men with their gloves—Hylle's followers who kept, or were kept, apart from the Dales-people. Was this their real appearance? But why were these few pillar-bound?

It was a relief to look back to the wholly human forms of the man and woman. Once more their eyes burned, besought—If she could only understand what she could do—must do!

Those eyes were closing! There was a shade of intense concentration on their faces. Impulsively Ysmay raised her hand, shook back her sleeve so that the serpent was free. Because once before she had looked into its eyes with strange results, she did so again.

Larger—larger—now she stared at a single yellow globe, clean, free from the blue taint of the others. This time no window formed through which she viewed another place. Rather there was a whispering voice. Because she sensed that what it would tell her was of utmost importance, she strained to catch words, to make coherence of the sound. But there was no intelligible message. And at last the whisper died away.

She swayed. Her back and her feet ached, as did her head. She might not only have stood in that position for a length of time, but she felt as if she had concentrated on some mental exercise too hard for her. Ysmay sighed and let her stiff arm fall to her side.

The eyes of those in the pillars were open, but they were dull, dimmed. No longer was there that spark of vigorous demand. Whatever they had tried had failed.

Still she could not leave them. The knife had failed, and communication. With some vague hope of finding assistance, she made her way among the pillars to those tables she had sighted at her entrance.

They did not bear such utensils as she had seen below. But still—at least on one table—she did not like what she saw.

On it stood a cup. The foot was amber, dark, cracked, worn and warped. Its bowl was of a gray-white material. The interior was stained. Beside it, naked point to the stars, was a knife, its hilt the gray of the bowl, its blade—Ysmay jerked away, for along the blade crawled and writhed lines of red, as if runes of some forbidden knowledge formed, vanished, ran again.

There was a book, laid open at midpoint. Its pages were yellowed, wrinkled, inscribed with heavy black lines of writing unlike any she had seen before. There was one ornamented capital on each page, but not wreathed by flowers like those in old chronicles. No, here were two small scenes which brought a flush of shame to her face as she looked upon them, so vile were they, yet so ably done that they lingered hatefully in the mind.

Here also was an upright frame in which hung a bell of discolored metal, and beside it the mallet which would make it sound. Last of all was a candle-holder so wrought that once more she flushed. The candle it held was misshapen, beginning as one thick piece and then subdividing into five thinner portions of unequal length.

Evil hung so strongly here Ysmay could believe it visible as a black cloud. She backed away, thus coming to the second board. What lay there was different—irregular lumps of amber new taken from bedding. She thought she could even recognize those which had been passed from hand to hand at Uppsdale. There were few enough of them, very small showing compared with the wealth in those pillars.

The evil things, which Ysmay did not doubt were used for black ensorcelment, the rough amber—She had seen enough to guess that Hylle wrought ill here. And she was oath-tied to him!

Black indeed were the tales she had heard. There were men reported to have dealings with the older powers rooted here. Was Quayth a garden that brought forth evil harvest?

On impulse Ysmay drew forth the amulet of Gunnora. The old

shadowed ways were those which dealt with death and destruction, but Gunnora stood for life and light. How much protection lay in her talisman, Ysmay could not guess. But she felt stronger for holding it.

A table of amber lumps, another which was a shrine to vile powers, and the prisoners in the pillars. Also—when Hylle returned what would be her fate? She tried to think clearly and to some purpose.

This was a fateful night, one of the four within the year when certain powers were loosed for good or ill. Hylle had fared forth. What did he seek out in the cold and the night? Some greater force than any he could raise within these walls?

Ysmay turned once more to look upon the double star of the pillars, the blue burning candles. Power was locked herein. Why had she been able to pass freely through any safeguard Hylle must have set? For such places had their guards which humankind dared not meddle with.

Was it a trap, and she had been allowed to walk in?

That she must test! Gripping Gunnora's amulet, Ysmay hurried for the stairs, turning her face from the two in the pillars as she passed. Down she went without hindrance into the ground floor chamber—Only to stop in fear. For the mirror on the wall reflected another form. It stood unmoving, neither, advancing to cut her off from the door, nor to seize her.

Horrible it was, but now she could see it was no creature living, but rather a tall carving of amber, wrought into demon form. Whence had it come? Who had brought it here?

She sped past it to the door, gave a great push. To her vast relief the door swung open readily and the fresh cold air of night was like freedom itself.

Once more she rounded the walls and gained her own tower. She slipped inside breathing quickly, looking for Ninque or one of the wenches.

Empty—the coals on the hearth gave enough light to make sure. Ysmay scuttled for the stairs, won to her bedchamber, crossed to the window to look out. Had any tracked her from the star tower? If so, they had left no footprints in the snow that was now being whirled about by a rising wind. With luck its shifting would cover her path.

She sat down on the bed and tried to make sense of all she had seen. Hylle had told her he was both astrologer and alchemist. The second chamber of the star tower, with all that clutter of equipment, could be the work place of an alchemist. Such learning was in the bonds of reason, though few of the Dalesmen had it.

But the top chamber was different. Ysmay rubbed her hands across her eyes, remembering far too well that which lay on the first

table—the foul book, all the rest. What was done there was not the result of straightforward learning.

As for the prisoners in the pillars, most had shown no signs of life. But she had not lingered to examine them closely. However, she was sure that the man and the woman were held in some foul ensorcelment. She must think—if Hylle had the power to do that, what chance had she against him?

She could creep out of Quayth perhaps this night. Creep—to die of cold and exposure in the wilds. She had no chance without supplies or plan to survive the long journey back to the Dales. Sure death one way—but to stay might mean worse than death. She must chance that.

Ysmay laid aside her cloak, undressed, putting her garments back in a chest so Ninque might not remark them later. Then she crawled into bed, drawing tight the curtains, so that she lay in a darkness which for that moment felt safe. But the serpent was still on her wrist. And around her neck Gunnora's charm.

Perhaps she slept. Afterward she could not remember. Then, as if someone had summoned her, she sat up. The dark was gone. Instead there was dim twilight within the tent of the curtains. Somehow she was able to see the pictures there.

Ysmay had thought their patterning had been given only on the outer side, facing the room. But here they glowed, as if their half-lost outlines were drawn in the cold, clear light of starshine. They were of many kinds, but notable among them was a face. The woman in the pillar!

To her great surprise and fear, the lips writhed on the face, as if a portrait worked with needle and thread fought for speech. And Ysmay heard a small sound, like a gasp for breath.

"The serpent—key—key—"

The light faded, she could no longer see the face as she sat hunched among the tumbled coverings. The serpent was warm about her wrist, as if lit by an inner fire.

"Key—" Ysmay repeated aloud. Key to what? To be found where? She pulled at the curtain—should she return to the star tower? There was light in the chamber, but it came from the dawn. Her chance was gone. If she would make another invasion of Hylle's place she must wait for nightfall.

The day was long and through it she played a taxing role. Ninque brought forth feast dainties and also stayed within call. While Ysmay busied her brain with planning. She dared not try once more to drug Ninque's cup, for she did not underestimate the woman, and to issue another such invitation might awake her suspicions. Was her usual attentiveness today a sign that she was watching Ysmay for some purpose?

Her plans came to nothing because at dusk Hylle and his men rode in. She watched them from the window, steeling herself against the need of fronting the dark lord without revealing any unease.

To her relief he did not come directly to her, but went to the star tower. Then her relief was quickly gone as she wondered if her intrusion had left some trace. That thing of amber before the mirror—whoever had transported it there could well have seen her.

Ysmay twisted her hands together, her fingers seeking the serpent band. A key—to what? She was like one who had an invisible sword lying to hand yet could not find it for her defense.

She drew on her powers of self-control. To seem as usual she must work hard. She went down to the lower chamber where Ninque was setting out the evening meal.

"My lord has returned." Ysmay was surprised at the steadiness of her voice.

Ninque looked up. "It is so. Do you wish to bid him to your table, my lady?"

Ysmay nodded. "This is a feast night. If he is not tired from his journeying, perhaps he will find some small pleasure so. Can you send a message—"

"I, myself, will go, my lady. He will wish to share your feast." There was almost a note of authority in that, as if Ninque could urge this on her master and be obeyed.

Ysmay stood by the fire, facing the door, summoning strength against this meeting. Hylle had been strange enough, a person to evoke awe before. But now—now that she suspected what he might do, could she face him showing no measure of what she had learned?

It seemed long, that wait until Ninque returned.

The woman, not shedding her cloak, said in her usual soft and insinuating voice, "My lady, my lord has prepared a feast for your tasting. He would have you come—"

Ninque did not finish her sentence. For Hylle entered. There was a light powdering of snow on his cloak and he carried over his arm another drapery of silken material, the color of rich amber. This he shook out to display a cloak with clasps of amber at throat and waist.

"A fairing for my lady." He whipped it about Ysmay before she could move. "And a feast waiting, so come, let us be merry after the custom of your own people."

She could not avoid his grasp, he used the cloak as a net to entrap her. But fear was a cold thrust through her, a sour taste in her mouth. She had wondered why he wanted her, now she was about to learn and she had no defense against him.

Yet he spoke lightly as he drew her with him across the courtyard. They might have been truly man and wife on their way to a

happy hour. She dared not reveal her fear lest it weaken her past all hopes of trying to save herself from whatever he planned.

They came into the room of the mirror. There was more light there now, but that monster carving was still in place, only now it faced them at the door.

Hylle's arm tightened about her. Had she betrayed herself with a start? Or could her reaction be counted normal at facing such ugliness?

Still keeping one arm firmly about her waist, Hylle put forth his other hand. The thing moved, stretched upward as might a cat to meet some caress, until his fingers rested upon its spiked crest But—it must be a carving—not a living thing!

Ysmay heard Hylle's soft laughter. "Does this frighten you, my lady? Did I not warn you I was learned in strange ways? And now you will see that I have strange servants also. But I do not loose this one yet, it shall play sentry for us. Come!"

She fought her fear. That he meant her very ill she was now sure. Yet she had come from generations of fighting men who held their lands against many perils, or fought until death trying to do so.

Under the edge of the cloak he used to engulf and hold her, she caught at the serpent. A key—to what? However she schooled herself against vain hope as they went up and up, past the room which was a work place, into the chamber of pillars. And he pushed her before him, saying:

"Welcome, my lady, to the heart of Quayth. Its secrets you have sought by stealth, now you shall find them out. Though whether you shall relish your enlightenment is another question."

On he urged her between the pillars to the center, then dragged her around to face the two there.

6

"You call yourself Lady of Quayth, Ysmay of the Dales. Look you now upon the true lady of this hold, Yaal the Far-Thoughted. I wonder where her thoughts now range, since she can travel by thought alone. Wench, she is such as your upstart blood cannot equal. Her rule was old before your people arose from root-grubbing savages."

He looked upon Yaal as if he hated yet respected her, with more emotion than Ysmay had seen in him before.

"Yaal—she is such as cannot be dreamed of by your ignorant breed. Just as Quayth, Quayth was once what it shall be again—since I have file will and now the tools to make it so.

"You gave me those, wench, for which thank that small power you bow head to. Otherwise—you would be as a flea cracked between the nails and dropped into the fire. For you brought me the seed from which I shall grow much. Hear that, my Lady Yaal? Did you dream that I had come to the end of my power when my supply of amber was finished? If you did you underestimated me and the greed of these Dale barbarians!

"I have amber again. Yes, and many strange uses for it. Hear you that, Yaal!" And he held out his hand as if to tap on the surface of the pillar, but did not quite touch it.

Yaal's eyes were open but the girl could read no message, not even a spark of life in them. Hylle's grip loosened. Impulsively Ysmay shook back the hampering folds of the cloak, made a deep reverence to the prisoner.

Hylle stared. "What do you, wench?"

"Did you not say she is lady here, my lord?" Ysmay did not know what moved her, it was as if action and words were dictated by another. "Then it is meet that I pay her honor. And he—" she turned her head to nod at the other pillar—"if she be lady, is he lord here?"

Hylle's face was convulsed. He struck out at her viciously and she could not dodge the full force of the blow. It sent her spinning against the pillar which held the man and she clung to it to keep her feet.

In Hylle's hand there was now a glittering, golden rope. He swung it loopwise as he mouthed words which had no meaning for Ysmay. The loop whirled, circled about her, fell to the floor. Then Hylle's face was smooth, guarded. He had regained control.

"Bide my pleasure here, wench. It will be for a long time. I go to prepare the means to assure that now."

He left, and Ysmay was bewildered. That shining circle, now that she had time to examine it, was composed of beads of amber strung on a chain. She could not guess its purpose.

But Hylle was gone, and if the serpent was a key, she must bestir herself to find the lock. She took a step forward, to discover that she could not cross the amber circle. It kept her as tightly prisoner as if she were in a cage.

For a second or two she was as strongly held by fear as by the chain. Then the strength of her breed returned and she forced herself to think rather than feel. It was plain that Hylle controlled great powers.

He kept these two captive, which meant that, as his enemies, they were potential allies for her. If she could enlist their aid—

The serpent was the key, but how to use it? Ysmay looked at the woman, then the man. She stood between them, but closer to the man. Moistening her lips with her tongue, she thought of keys and locks—There was no visible lock, but then neither was the serpent an ordinary key. Locks—the pillar people were locked—She shook back her sleeve, reached out her arm until she could touch the serpent head to the amber casing about the man.

Around her wrist was a blaze of fire which brought a small, choked cry from her. But she held it fast.

The amber pillar began to change. From that small point of contact it filmed, darkened to an ashy dullness. Cracks appeared in it, ran in jagged lines, widened to fall in flakes. And the flakes on the floor powdered into dust.

A tremor ran through the newly freed prisoner. She saw his chest expand as he drew in a great breath. His hands arose in small, jerky movements to his head, slipped down over cheeks and chin as if he sought thus to assure himself of his own being.

He did not look at her but rather stepped stiffly from the pillar base and stood, his head turning from side to side, as if he sought something which should be in plain view and yet was not.

If he hunted some weapon, he was not to have time for a thorough search.

From the stairhead came a rasping hiss. Ysmay cried out. The monster thing from the lower chamber hunched there, its hideous head darting as might a snake's seeking to strike.

The man faced it with empty hands and Ysmay thought he had little chance if the thing rushed him. Yet he raised those hands and, using his two pointing forefingers, he sketched in the air.

Glowing lines of light appeared, a grill of them crossing and recrossing. Behind that strange barrier, he put a partly clenched fist to his lips as if he held a trumpet, and loosed a murmur of sound.

Ysmay could distinguish no words, only low crooning notes repeated over and over. The monster paced back and forth, its armored tail twitching in frustration, the spines on its head erect. It

edged among the pillars, but kept a wary distance from the light. And still the man crooned those three notes over and over again.

Then—

From out of the air swooped a bolt of blue fire, the ugly color of the candles. Seemingly heartened, the monster, too, surged forward, shaking its head from side to side as if it advanced under a rain of blows.

The man showed no dismay. The sound of his murmuring voice grew stronger. There was more movement in the chamber, beyond the candles, someone sliding along the wall.

Ysmay, without seeing the pale face of that newcomer, still knew it was Hylle. He was trying to reach not the freed captive but—

The table! That table where lay the instruments of black sorcery. And it would seem that his former captive had not yet sighted him.

Ysmay would have cried aloud in warning, but she found that she could not. It might have been the power of the ring about her feet which also stifled the voice in her throat. Yet she had been able to use the serpent once—what else might she do with it?

She stretched forth her arm at an awkward angle so that she might touch the yellow-eyed head to the circlet about her. There was a flare of blue fire. She cried out, using her hands to shield her face from the fierce glow. There appeared to be no heat in the flames, only blinding light.

The flash seemed to dim her sight. Tears ran down her cheeks as she fought to see, though it was like peering through a thick veil. She could not make out even the shadow of Hylle.

She felt about her and touched the smooth surface of that other pillar. If the serpent had freed the man, why not Yaal? She laid the wristlet to the casing of amber.

This time Ysmay could not see the result, but she could feel the cracking, the crumbling. And the dust of it sprinkled her hands, puffed about her body. There was movement. Hands caught her, pulled her erect, steadied her for an instant against a firm body. Then both body and hands were gone.

Ysmay wiped her eyes, blinked. Yaal was moving purposefully toward the table. Ysmay stumbled in her wake. Her eyes were clearing. She could see.

The assault of blue flames continued. The monster was now within the first row of pillars, weaving back and forth, a wild slaver dripping from its jaws. Ysmay's hand tightened around Gunnora's amulet.

Yaal reached the table, but Hylle was there, too. They fronted each other. His face was a mask of hate and malice, his lips flattened against his teeth as if he would show the same poisonous fangs the

monster bore.

His hand flashed out, finger closing about the hilt of the knife. He flicked the keen blade across his own palm, tried to spill the quickly welling blood into the encrusted cup. But Yaal raised her finger and pointed, and straightaway the cut was closed into a seam of an old scar. No blood, save for a drop or two, entered the bowl.

"Not so, Hylle." Her voice was low, but it carried above the hissing of the monster and the crooning that kept it at bay. "Not even with your blood can you summon—"

"Tell me not what I may do!" he cried. "I am Hylle, Master—"

Yaal shook her head. "Only because of our lack of caution did you become Master. Your day is done, Hylle."

She did not turn her head to look to Ysmay, but she held out her right hand.

"Let the serpent come," she ordered.

Ysmay, as if she understood perfectly what was to be done, raised her own hand. She felt the circlet come alive. It streaked across her flesh to leap through the air, fall into Yaal's palm, move so swiftly that it was a blur, to encircle Yaal's wrist.

Hylle started forward as if to prevent the transfer. But he was too late.

"Now." Yaal held up her hand. The serpent, though in a hoop, was not inert. Its head swayed and its eyes glowed with yellow fire.

> "Aphar and Stolla, Worum, awake!
> What was once drunk, must be tongued.
> What was wrought, you must unmake!
> In the Name of—"

But that final word was no name, only a roaring and a tumult in the room, which made Ysmay cry out and cover her tormented ears.

The cup on the table began to whirl in a mad dance. Hylle, with a cry, tried to catch it. The knife fell from his grasp and leaped into the air, where it dangled enticingly as he strove to lay hand upon it, seeming to forget all else.

It bobbed and dangled, always just a fraction beyond his reach. As he scrambled after it Ysmay saw there were no longer any flashes of blue fire, and that the crooning sounds had a note of triumph.

The flying goblet brought Hylle well away from the table, close to where those shattered pillars had stood. Then he seemed to awake from whatever spell had held him. He whirled about, crouched like a swordsman about to leap at an enemy.

"No!" he cried out defiantly. He threw out an arm as if to brush aside the cup and came soft-footed, with so deadly a look that Ysmay

shrank back, toward the two tables. This time he did not try to reach those instruments of evil. Instead his hands clutched at the lumps of unworked amber.

"Yet—yet—" he screamed. Holding the amber, he ran for the stairs. None tried to stop him. Instead Yaal went to the table of evil. There stood the cup as if it had never risen. The knife lay beside it.

Yaal gazed, her serpent-girdled hand extended. The head of the creature still swayed from side to side. It was as if she now memorized something of vast importance. Then, as if she had come to a decision, she turned again.

There was less sound. Ysmay looked around. The grille of light was dimming. And the monster had withdrawn, snuffling and hissing, to the head of the stair. Yaal joined her fellow prisoner.

"Let be. His mind is closed. There can be only one end, as we should have known long ago."

He dropped his hand from his lips and nodded. "He made the choice, abide by it now he shall!"

But Yaal wore a look of faint perplexity. She glanced right and then left.

"There is something else," she said slowly. "Do you not feel it, Broc?"

He lifted his head as if to a wind and his nostrils expanded to breathe the air.

"It is she!" For the first time he looked at Ysmay as if she were a presence.

Now Yaal eyed her also.

"She is no creature of his, she has worn the serpent. This is another power. Hylle deals in death, or life-in-death. This is a power of life. What charm do you hold, girl?"

Ysmay answered by holding out her hand so that Gunnora's amulet might be seen. Yaal studied it for a moment and then nodded.

"It has been long and long again since that device has been seen at Quayth. The protection of Rathonna—Yes, to add to what he had, Hylle would want that indeed."

The girl found her tongue. "But he did not take it from me when he could have."

Yaal shook her head. "Such a thing of power must come only as a gift. Taken by force it will turn against its user. One does not deal lightly with Rathonna."

"I do not know the name. This is an amulet of Gunnora."

"What is a name?" Yaal asked. "Certain powers have always been known and given different names by different peoples. I recognize that as coming from Rathonna. Of old she did not turn her face from us, but was willing to lend her aid when the need arose. If Hylle thought

to use Her—"

Broc interrupted. "You know Hylle, he would think himself above any threat of reprisal, or else scheme how he could turn it to his own advantage. As he schemes now. Yaal—as he schemes now!"

"The stars have come full turn, and the serpent is ready to strike. I do not think Hylle either schemes nor stirs his great pot to any purpose this night. Now is the hour for us to make an end."

Together they walked toward the stairhead, Ysmay trailing them. She would not stay alone in this haunted place.

The monster hissed. It had flattened its body to the floor and its red eyes were fixed on them. Broc made a pass of hand through the air and between his fingers he now held a sword.

No light reflected from any steel. The blade had no cutting edge, but was ruddy brown and carved as if from wood. However, seeing it, the monster slunk away. It hissed and spat, retreating steadily. Thus they came down to Hylle's workshop, where noxious fumes were heavy.

In the center was a fire in a stone-lined pit. From a crossbar over the fire hung a giant pot into which Hylle was flinging handfuls of objects from a nearby bench. As he filled the pot so he chanted, paying no attention to those who came.

"Are his wits turned?" Broc asked. "Surely he must know that this will not work again."

"Oh, but it will!" Yaal held up her arm. The yellow eyes of the snake glowed, grew larger, larger, became a single orb, a sun hanging in the dark room. The monster gave a bubbling scream.

It raced across the floor—not toward the three by the stair, but for its master. At the same time the amulet flamed in Ysmay's hand. The color it gave off was green, and its light rippled and lapped across the floor, speeding to the pit.

The green flood boiled over the lip but did not douse the flames, merely set them leaping higher. Now they were green flames.

Ysmay heard the break in Hylle's chant. He screamed as the monster reached him. They writhed together, tottered and fell forward, still entwined, into the bubbling pot.

Instantly the orb was gone, the green flames died. In the pot a liquid seethed quietly just below the rim, and there was no way of seeing below the surface.

Dawn and a new day. Ysmay leaned against the outer wall of the star tower. It was hard to believe that she could breathe the fresh winter air after the fumes of the tower and its stench of evil. That she had survived the night past was a miracle. For the moment she was content with that alone.

Then Yaal's hand was on her arm and they were three in the courtyard with the gray sky above them.

"It is changed, sad changed," Yaal said. "This is not Quayth as it should be."

"It can be changed again," Broc said briskly. "That which ate its heart is gone. And we have the future—"

What of Ysmay? She was not Lady of Quayth, nor had ever been. Would she now ride to Uppsdale, even less than she had been before?

"I was Hylle's wife," she said slowly. "It was by my own choice that I came to Quayth—though I knew not what he was—yet I took this path without protest."

"And so were the saving of us all." Broc looked at her. His face with its resemblance to Hylle moved her in a way she did not understand. No—he was not Hylle, rather what an untried girl once thought Hylle might be. "Nor were you Hylle's wife," he continued, "nor his creature—if you had been, you could not have worn the serpent, or stood with us this night."

"Say not Hylle's wife, but rather Rathonna's daughter!" Yaal's voice had almost the tone of an order. "Many and strange are the weavings of fortune. We are of an old people, we of Quayth, and we have learning which has given us powers the ignorant grant to godlings. Yet we are also of human kind in many ways. That is why we can have such as Hylle among us. They are of our own brood. Hylle wanted to master certain powers it was not right to meddle with —"

"He wanted more," Broc broke in. "He wanted—"

"Me? Perhaps, but rather he wanted what he thought he could gain through me. And he was strong, too strong then, for us, though we did what we could—"

"Like hiding the serpent?" Ysmay asked.

"Like that. But the waiting was long until one would come who could use it, Rathonna's daughter. You say you are not Lady of Quayth, but do not say that again! Hylle wished to use you to gain the true amber he must have to build the false he used for dark purposes. For the false must always have a grain of the true within it. He wished to use you, but you were not for him. Be proud and glad, daughter of Rathonna."

"Welcome to Quayth," Broc added. "And this time a true welcome, doubt not that!"

Nor did Ysmay then, or ever. Though whether she was the Ysmay of Uppsdale in those after days, or someone much changed by fate, she sometimes wondered. Not that it mattered for Quayth's welcome was warm enough to content her.

Nor did she need to go into that shunned tower and look upon a

lump of miswrought amber in which man and monster stood locked in endless embrace, to remind herself of what lay behind.